NEW NOVEL BY WILLA CATHER AMONG LATE FICTION

Willa Cather's Latest Book Is Another Triumph

"A Lost Lady" Deals With Wife of Nebraska Railroad King and Village Life.

By EDWARD WILLIAMSON.

Willa Cather, Nebraska novelist, whose novel, "One of Ours," won the 1922 Pulitzer prize, has added a new triumph to her already rather imposing list with "A Lost Lady," published in book form by Alfred A. Knopf.

Like her other major works, it is a tale of the western prairies. In it lives once more the spirit of the Nebraska plains which Miss Cather, bet ter than any other, knows how to portray.

Not the west of the pioneer this time, but of the railroad aristocracy that grew up when the great transcontinental lines were being pushed across the plains. Hard times had not yet come to mar the faith of these builders of empire, these conquerors of the wilderness.

Such a one was Captain Forrester, and about his young and pretty wife, Marian Forrester, marooned in the captain's mansion in a little Nebraska town, the tale is built.

Men were necessary to Marian Forrester. On this hypothesis Miss Cather has constructed her plot. It is ordinary. The book is nothing of the sort.

Miss Cather has built it into a narrative which, if it is not art, is at least first rate literature.

She knows the implements of her trade, does Willa Cather. She employes them with an expertness which conceals all scaffolding of technique. Her tales appear hewn in the rough, as though by swift, telling strokes of a woodman's ax. The result leaves an impression of utter simplicity.

The edges, of course, a trifle rough, and here and there a projecting knot which might well have been trimmed down, perhaps.

Rough? Examine that knot. It was fashioned with a jeweler's chisel. That is the gift of concealment of literary effort which is Willa Cather's.

Of Marian Forrester, Miss Cather says: "If she merely bowed to you, merely looked at you, it constituted a personal relation. Something about her took hold of one in a flash; one became acutely conscious of her, of her fragility and grace, of her mouth, which could say much without words; of her eyes, lively, laughing, intimate, nearly always a little mocking."

Banal? Adjective besprinkled?

Find me a better paragraph of its sort, and I will go with you to sing anthems under the author's window.

The tale deals with Marian Forrester's reactions to her husband and environment, and the reaction of the village to her.

From a plainsman, driver for a freighting company that carried supplies across the prairies from Nebraska City to Cherry Creek, as Denver was then known, Captain Forrester had forged upward to become a builder of railroads. An inherent dignity and poise permitted him, in affluence, to occupy the place customarily reserved in fiction for Kentucky colonels.

A staunch man, and a kindly man, withal, was the captain, whose reputation of absolute integrity was known to railroad men from Chicago

to the coast, and whose name for open handed hospitality brought a constant stream of visitors to his comfortable estate at Sweet Water.

They were directors, general managers, vice presidents, superintendents, auditors, freight agents and departmental assistants. The fact that they were "connected" with the railroad gained them entree like a badge of knighthood. These were the aristocracy of the middle west of the period.

And men were necessary to Marian Forrester.

For the rest, the book moves swiftly, but with meticulous care. Robbed by death of her husband, from whom, although she was unfaithful to him, she appeared to draw that insouciant vigor which was the charm of her personality, she fell and disintegrated, like the steel of a rapier turning to tin.

Her former position as queen of the village had left her but few friends in the place; and those who were her friends, she drove away by the baseness of her descent.

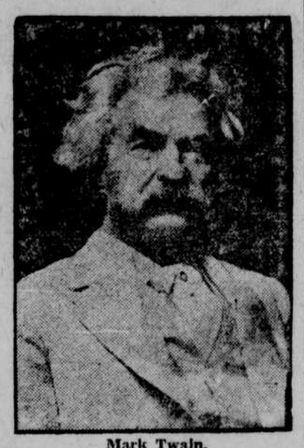
She had never, perhaps, been wholly virtuous, but she had had strength of character, she had inspired virtue, and she had been charming. Now she was no longer charming.

The response of the village to this change in her is used with telling effect. Marian herself remains inscrutable in her weakness and in her reckless courage.

The first edition of the book contains 20,220 copies. Nebraska might do worse than to absorb them.

Literary Leftovers of Mark Twain Published in Form of New Volume

Unpublished Essays and Little Known Reprints Collected by Humorist's Biographer



Mark Twain.

Had the last paragraph in the newly published book of odds and ends gathered up from Mark Twain's writing desk after his death and put forth by Harper's under the title of "Europe and Elsewhere" been substituted for the pedantic appreciation by the learned Dr. Brander Mathews, the publishers might have got just as satisfactory an explanation of the book's tenor, and had enough money left over to buy a new automatic cigar lighter for the Ford.

That paragraph is, in epitome, the author's lifelong protest against things as they are.

"We all do no end of feeling," he observes, "and we mistake it for thinking. And out of it we get an aggregation which we consider a boon. Its name is Public Opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it is the Voice of God."

Samuel Clemens had the misfortune to be born potentially a benign Schopenhauser, if you forgive the paradox, in an age of nineteenth century Babbitry. His whole career was a pulling in at the reins of his literary Pegasus for fear of what people might think.

Even turned into the innocuous channels of "Tom Sawyer," "Huckleberry Finn" and "Pudd'nhead Wilson," the fire of his genius was slow to warm up the Harry Hansens and the Christopher Morleys of his day. The children first discovered him. It was just. He was a connoisseur of the juvenile heart.

It is only within the last decade or two that America's more competent critics have lifted him out of the drawer reserved for writers of children's tales and transfixed him with a pin, like a new species of moth, in that portion of the show case reserved for specimens labeled "genius." The late Mr. Clemens, it is conceivable, might have chuckled at both classifications.

He was a shockingly independent soul. His writings ooze with it.

It is an open question whether Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain's biographer, who compiled this volume of his literary leftovers, did him aught but a disservice. Some of them are purs gold. Others are unmitigated dross.

There is in the volume an undertone of protest against the smug ignorance of the age in which the author lived—the birth of the battle later to be waged, coldly and vindictively by Sinclair Lewis and Ben Hecht, and riotously and joyfully, with much smacking of slapsticks against tightly stretched pantaloons, by George Jean Nathan and Henry Mencken.

It is to this undertone that the book owes its significance. For a student of American literary history, the volume is a jewel. Otherwise, it is rather dry stuff, despite occasional flashes of humor.

The style is charming. Mark Twain was a competent craftsman. His description of his travels is excellently done, but not even a Mark Twain can save a travelog from dullness.

If you have a vision of Mark Twain from his caricatures, as a ruddy faced, bristling mustached, jovial soul, always ready with a story and always ready to laugh at someone's else story, the book will be a revelation to you in the depth and exactness of its thinking.

It puts the bluff, blustering Missouri planter type of literatus in the role of student, philosopher and prophet.

He even delves into politics and suggests a method for getting the best men in both major parties nominated for office.

The plan is nothing more nor less than the organizing of a balance of voting power into a "vote casting" party, none of whose members ever may run for or accept public office.

Thus shorn of all power of political conquest, or rather, political loot, this party can, he conceives, throw its strength to the best men, and insure their election, regardless of party affiliation, thus forcing both parties to place men of high caliber in nomination, and guaranteeing an administration of intelligence, no matter who wins.

The scheme is logical. It is beautifully and altruistically conceived. It is a credit to a man who loved his fellow men and shared their sufferings.

It has only one defect. That is, that it will not work. What, in the absence of political gain, will bind this balance-of-power party together? And who, sitting impartially, is going to name the better of the two men placed in nomination? And who, pray tell, is going to prevent a split in the third party itself over a difference of opinion as to who is the better man? These questions, while they may have explained themselves readily to Mr. Clemens, are infinitely puzzling to one who has followed politics, conventions, elections, and the resulting hokum through a series of administrations.

Quite the most delightful chapter in the book is that in which the author sets forth, in the light of his own genius, the precocious talents of a 7-year-old Scotch girl who died more than a century ago without ever bringing to fruition the prodigious literary ability which was in her. Marjory Fleming was her name. Mark Twain points out with a metaphorical twinkle her efforts to write what she felt, and at the same time to keep within the bounds of propriety laid down by her Presbyterian parents. He sympathized with her.

Even in the book's dullest moments it has the appeal of the author's intense humanness.

He was obsessed with that most human of all traits, laziness. He makes no less than five references to it in some 300 pages.

The tale of how Mark Twain used to give the janitor in the newspaper office a nickel to sweep around him, to avoid the necessity of taking his feet off the desk, has become tradition.

On page 172, in "The Lost Napoleon," he explains abandoning a boat trip down the Rhone when the current refused to carry the boat any further, for the reason that it would have meant miles of rowing for his boatman.

"I do not like work, even when another person does it," he comments.

Of such is the cloth of genius. Of that same fabric are his letter to Satan and the diaries of Adam and Eve, reprinted in the present volume.

There is room for it on anybody's five-foot shelf.

Dr. Phelps Writes of Books and Things

"As I Like It," by William Lyon Phelps. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

Readers of Scribners's are familiar with the department Dr. Phelps conducts under the heading, "As I Like It," in which he deals with books, music, art, birds, flowers, men, authors, actors and a host of other topics, more or less related, always in a gentle, quizzical fashion. Now and then he is very direct and seldom does he leave his reader long in doubt as to how he likes whatever he is touching. His criticism is sound and illuminating. The volume just received is a collection of the monthly essays, chats, or whatever the brilliant paragraphs may be called, strung together as they have come to us in the magazine and providing a really delightful book.

Wierd and Fascinating

"Not in Our Stars," by Michael Maurice, Lippincott.

Two men are in love with the same girl. By mutual agreement each is to take a week in which to win the choice of his heart. Felix Menzies, a man of an arresting personality and the gift of second sight, is to have the first week.

At the end of the week he is watching an eclipse with Hester Temple, the girl, when he suddenly faints. When he regains consciousness he finds that the time is one year later and he is about to be hung for murder. He has no recollection of whom he has killed.

Menzies goes to the scaffold and feels the sensation of the trap being sprung. He, however, awakes and then discovers that his life from the time he fainted until the time of his hanging must be lived backward.

Upton Sinclair Again

Upton Sinclair has stepped forward with "Hell," which de describes as "a verse drama and photoplay." It is beautifully written, and although fantastic in conception and unique in structure it is rather a brilliant conveyance, which permits Mr. Sinclair to carry on his criticism of the modern social system quite gracefully and at times convincingly. "Hell" is published by the author at Pasadena, Cal.